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TAGS: PREL PGOV PINR NI

SUBJECT: NIGERIA: YAR'ADUA SHUFFLES DEFENSE AND INTERIOR
MINISTERS

REF: A. ABUJA 1278
¶B. LAGOS 297
¶C. LAGOS 230
¶D. ABUJA 2466

Classified By: Political Counselor Walter N.S. Pflaumer for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d)

¶1. (U) On July 14, President Yar'Adua moved Minister of Defense Shettima Mustapha to the Ministry of Interior, in exchange for the Minister of Interior, Major General Godwin Abbe who is now the Minister of Defense. In addition, Minister of State (Interior) Abdulrahman Adamu swapped positions with the Minister of State for Defense Ademola Seriki. These changes became effective immediately. Press reports linked the reshuffle to both the June 12 attack on the Atlas Cove oil facility in Lagos, for which umbrella group named Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) claimed responsibility, as well as the June 13 release of self-styled MEND leader Henry Okah (refs A and B).

¶2. (U) Although no official reason for the reshuffle was announced, press reports assumed that the change may be part of the GON's attempt to reach a negotiated peace with "militants" in the Niger Delta. In his first interview with local press as the Minister of Defense, Abbe stated that Okah agreed to cooperate with the GON and "would be used to facilitate peace in the troubled region of the Niger Delta."

¶3. (C) Comment: There has still not been any official explanation for the cabinet reshuffle. By switching the two Ministers' portfolios without sacking either of them, Yar'Adua avoided the long, tortuous business of having again to consult with Governors and others about replacements, then getting them confirmed by the Senate (FYI: the Nigerian constitution requires the Cabinet to include representatives from all the states, each of whom must be confirmed by the Senate. By tradition, the state governors and regional "godfathers" play a prominent role in choosing the Ministers-designate. The President, however, has full authority to reassign portfolios among the Ministers. End FYI).

¶4. (C) Comment continued: Yar'Adua may have been impressed by Abbe's performance as chair of the Presidential Panel on Amnesty and Disarmament of Militants in the Niger Delta, and therefore may have considered Abbe to have a set of useful skills. In addition we suspect the Villa may have wanted

someone different to serve as Minister of Defense, after having been somewhat left out of the picture by the timing of the May JTF assault (ref C) on "militant" commander Tompolo, and may have seen Abbe as more likely to keep the Villa in the loop on military plans. Shettima Mustapha was, in any case, always something of an odd duck in the Defense portfolio, having never had military experience; he has also really had a low profile as Defense Minister, and has suffered from some health problems. As noted in ref D, Abbe is a former Major General who previously served as governor of Akwa Ibom and Rivers states in various military governments, and formerly commanded an armored division. End Comment.

¶5. (U) This cable was coordinated with Consulate Lagos.
SANDERS